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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ADANA 0107

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM SOCI SCUL TU ADANA

SUBJECT: RURAL-TO-URBAN MIGRATION BY KURDS:
OBSERVATIONS OF A SOCIOLOGIST

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Mehmet Erbas, a junior faculty member at Mersin University, has conducted scholarly research about the migration of Kurds from the countryside to the cities of Turkey. He believes that "Kurdish identity" will survive transplantation to the metropolis as long as Kurdish migrants see a benefit to it. The Turkish State has no ability to influence this process. End summary.

¶12. (SBU) Mehmet Erbas, a young assistant professor of sociology at Mersin University's Science and Literature Faculty, has carved out a niche in the study of a very significant phenomenon of contemporary Turkey: the massive migration by rural Kurds to urban areas. This migration has dramatically changed the demographics of cities like Mersin, as well as other cities in the southeast, and indeed throughout the country. Istanbul, by some reckonings, is now the largest Kurdish city in the world.

¶13. (SBU) Erbas is not Kurdish. He hails from Ordu, on the Black Sea. He does not speak Kurdish. Nevertheless, he has undertaken the study of Kurdish migration because he feels it is a crucially important topic for understanding where Turkey is headed.

¶14. (SBU) In a wide-ranging April 11 discussion in his office at Mersin University, Erbas offered some perhaps unconventional thoughts about the nature, and consequences, of large-scale rural-to-urban migration by southeastern Kurds.

¶15. (SBU) First, "it's not about language." According to Erbas, the ability to speak Kurdish is not crucial to Kurdish identity in Turkey. There are politicized Kurds who do not know the language. He cited the case of the large Kurdish diaspora from Turkey that now resides in Western Europe. These Kurds, he said, have made no attempt to set up Kurdish language schools for their children. This stands in contrast to Turkish emigrants in Western Europe, who have done so. At the same time, he noted, Kurds living in Western Europe who came from northern Iraq did work to set up Kurdish-language education for their children - in effect, replicating the Kurdish-language educational system they had back in Iraq.

¶16. (SBU) Second, "it's not clear how much of the tenacity of the culture is its Kurdishness and how much is its ruralness." This observation would likely be agreed upon by many residents of Turkey's cities who have been urbanized longer, and who have noted, often with dismay, the persistence of rural folkways (in dress, in ritual, in family structure) in the city. A family slaughtering its Kurban Bayram sheep on a fifteenth-floor balcony of a high-rise in an

apartment complex is as likely to be Turkish as Kurdish.

17. (SBU) Third, there is class-consciousness among Kurds, but it has a twist. There is a large number of well-off, even wealthy, Kurds in a city like Mersin. Those who buy a summer beach house do not go out of their way to make sure they will have Kurdish neighbors there. On the other hand, if one goes to a typical Newroz (Nevruz, the Persian-Kurdish March 21 celebration of Spring) celebration in a large Turkish city, the crowd is likely to be made up of middle and lower-class Kurds. Wealthy Kurds do not usually attend. Why? Interestingly, according to Erbas, it is not out of snobbery. Rather, it is out of fear that being seen at such events by Turkish authorities might open them to accusations of being overly "politicized" in their Kurdishness. (Note: Some contacts recall for us that in the 1980s and 1990s there were wealthy and powerful Kurds who disappeared mysteriously. End note.) A prosperous and successful Kurd in Turkey still might worry about the risks of "guilt by association" with more radical elements.

18. (SBU) Fourth, the basic motivation for maintaining one's Kurdish identity after the move from the country to the city is, in Erbas' view, "to get something from it." The "something" he has in mind is not an ineffable kind of ethnic pride. Rather, it is something pragmatic in re housing and jobs. Uniquely among citizens of Turkey, the Kurds of the southeast over their history developed an elaborate system of "clan" or "tribe" ("asiret" in Turkish) affiliation. This system is part and parcel of the phenomenon of the "aga" (large feudal landowner) system - also peculiar to Kurdish lands in southeast Turkey. The salience of the clan system persists. Polling done among Kurdish youth in the southeast, for example, is ambiguous; depending on how one looks at it, young people's belief in the value of the clan system is either (predictably) fading or (remarkably) still alive. (Note: It was in angry reaction to the "feudalism" of the clan and "aga" system that a young Kurd named Abdullah Ocalan first embraced revolutionary politics as a Marxist at Ankara University in the 1970s. End note.)

19. (SBU) As it effects rural-to-urban migration, the relevance of enduring clan values among southeastern Turkey's Kurds is that a typical Kurdish rural-to-urban migrant is not, and cannot be, "an individual actor." While a random rural Turkish family from, say, Erzurum might be drawn to a neighborhood in Istanbul or Ankara that offers hometown contacts, there are many other neighborhoods to choose from. The tighter bonds of clan connection in the Kurdish world dictate differently. Clan is expected to seek out and be helped by clan. To fly in the face of that practice, according to Erbas, means that an incoming migrant simply might not be cold-shouldered. Concretely, that might mean not being offered informal assistance with job-seeking or not being invited to settle in a neighborhood, particularly a squatter ("gecekondu" in Turkish) neighborhood. Thus, maintaining one's "Kurdishness" is a practical necessity for access to housing and employment and social acceptance.

110. (SBU) Comment: As long as new migrants remain dependent on personal, family, and clan networks to survive, Kurdish ethnic identity is likely to survive in contemporary urban Turkey, no matter what actions Turkish State authorities take. End comment.

HOLTZ